

The Development of Online Student Skills: Successful online students share their secrets

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Abstract. As more and more traditional adult learners participate in online instruction, there may be a significant change in the development of student skills. This study surveyed a group of adult students who graduated from online credit granting graduate level degree programs with a 3.50 cumulative GPA or better, to learn more about student skills that really worked for them.

In this study, successful online graduates discuss their techniques in developing a time management strategy, making the most of online discussions, and how to *use it or lose it*. The participants in this study also describe how they make asking questions useful to their learning, stay motivated, and what online instruction techniques were the most useful. Another important technique discussed by these successful graduates is how to make a meaningful connection with fellow students in an online class.

In addition to the discussion of successful online learning techniques, participants in the study also describe learning from their classmates by using asynchronous discussions, and other means of communication available to the online learner. The successful techniques described in this study can be useful for anyone considering online learning, as well as instructors and course developers in designing more effective and interactive online courses.

Introduction

More and more, adult learners are finding the convenience and flexibility of online learning a match for their learning goals and busy lifestyles. This is evident in the proliferation of online degree programs, courses, and virtual universities in the past decade. A great deal of evidence exists showing that no significant differences should be expected regarding the effectiveness of well-designed online learning compared with well-designed in-person learning (Russell, 1999). Although it is fairly easy to locate an online course, or degree program that's both convenient and accessible, offering the ability to participate from home or work, there may be some challenges in developing a new set of student skills for this type of instruction. "For most online learners, the development of effective study skills is critical to their achievement and retention (i.e.,

their success and our success)” (Watkins, 2004). Identifying the differences in successful online student skills from the face-to-face classroom skills most learners have acquired can be of great value in making this transition.

Although educators have speculated on the development of student skills necessary to succeed in online learning, there is relatively little information from the perspective of a successful online student.

For online instructors, concerns of student readiness for distance education are central to how we plan and deliver online courses. While many learners come with remarkable skills for searching retail Websites and downloading music from the Internet, few have experience or knowledge of how to effectively use online technologies to advance their studies.” (Watkins, 2004)

This study was developed in the interest of providing this perspective, and identifying useful suggestions for learners considering online education.

Methodology

The study began with the development of a set of questions that emerged from a group of online course designers, faculty, and administrators. The question set was reviewed and edited by a larger group of faculty and administrators, and an online survey instrument was developed.

Participants for this study were selected from a list of graduates who had earned their degrees by taking 80% or more of their courses exclusively online. 59 students achieving a 3.50 cumulative grade point average or better participated in the study. Survey answers were open-ended allowing respondents to describe online learning techniques that were useful to them, and to tell the story of their personal student experiences. Survey responses were collected by means of an online instrument (Zoomerang), that maintained anonymity of research participants.

Successful Online Students Identify Seven Practical Tips:

1. Developing a time management strategy

Students were asked what time management strategies were most helpful. One of the challenges of being an online student is the self-discipline required to devote adequate time to class, in courses that may not have regularly scheduled (synchronous) class meetings. Most students found that establishing their own schedule for class time was helpful in ensuring enough time for class participation. One student commented:

Setting and staying to specific study days was one factor that worked for me. For example, in the evenings, throughout the week, I read my lessons. Saturdays were generally reserved for writing assignments. Saturdays were also devoted to responding to other on-line postings and building on what I had already submitted (Roper, 2006).

Another student stated that designating specific times to read, complete written assignments, and post dialogue to other students was helpful. Students also emphasized the need to create a schedule that gave them some flexibility and that wasn't overwhelming. One student explained, "I was careful not to put too much pressure upon myself when completing a homework assignment. I found that doing a little bit here and there avoided trying to do too much all at once" (Roper, 2006). Developing a schedule that designates specific times to login to and participate in class, and to carry out other course-related activities such as reading and doing research will help in a student's success as an online learner.

One of the key differences between in-person and online learning is the independence and ability to participate in the online class at a time convenient to the student. This also presents a potential problem, as it is sometimes easy to procrastinate and possibly fall behind in the online course. The graduates who participated in the study were asked how they avoided this problem. A few students commented that logging in to their every day and checking for new postings or updates helped prevent them from falling behind. Several students commented on the requirement of weekly assignments made by their instructor, which kept them on a regular schedule in the course. One student explained:

You have to discipline yourself in maintaining your schedule and not allow any distractions to disrupt your plan. I would allow myself one hour of winding down from work, eat my dinner, and get to my study room. I found that if I put in about 3 – 4 hours of studying during the week, the weekly assignment would be completed by Thursday or Friday (Roper, 2006).

Another student stated that an upfront planning process was critical to succeeding in the online course, given that their studying was integrated with many other responsibilities.

2. Making the most of online discussions

Student interaction is mostly done through an online threaded discussion that allows students and instructors to interact in asynchronous time. This is a significant shift for students accustomed to in-class discussions, and may provide opportunities to develop richer discourse by means of written discussion that allows students to spend time crafting their responses. "Students implicitly value teacher feedback more highly than they value the feedback of other students. Thus, the teacher's role changes from that of provider of feedback to that of training students to provide and accept valuable feedback to one another" (Heckman & Annabi, 2006). When asked how these students were able to make the most of their online interaction with other students, some interesting techniques were identified. One student commented, "[i]nteracting with the other students was the fun part of my (online) classes. As much as possible, I would post a response, question, or comment to another student's posting. This built up an on-line relationship" (Roper, 2006). Another student suggested, "[r]espond to several student postings, but make sure you have something meaningful to add, don't just say 'good post' Also don't always interact with the same few classmates. Look for something to say with various students" (Roper, 2006). The role of the instructor is important in energizing class discussions online. A student explained, "weekly discussions were best when the teacher encouraged it, especially by having pro vs. con discussion, or asking why or how questions" (Roper, 2006). Instructors who establish clear expectations as to how threaded discussions are

used, or who ask specific questions in response to student postings can expect to energize richer dialogue in their online courses. Students who incorporate a plan for regular communication with their classmates into their overall course schedule will have greater success in their online course.

3. Use it or lose it

One challenge some students face when learning online is retention of the course content. Students surveyed agreed that finding a way to apply the concepts helped to retaining the information. “I applied the ‘use-or-lose’ technique. As soon as I’d read or study it, I put the knowledge to work through collaboration with students or at my place of employment” (Anonymous, in Roper, 2006). One way to apply these concepts goes back to the use of the online threaded discussion, where concepts can be interpreted, and restated in the students’ own words in an active dialogue with others. Another student commented that “applying the new material to what I already knew” (Roper, 2006) was a helpful way to retain the material from the online course. Several successful online students mentioned ways in which they were able to retain what they read, by developing a way to apply those concepts to a current or past experience. Some students explained that physically taking notes from the online text helped retain essential points. One student explained that she “took notes from the book and micro lectures, just as if (she) were in a regular face-to-face course” (Roper, 2006).

4. How to make asking questions useful to your learning

One student commented that “asking questions is integral to learning. By asking questions, fellow students and instructors would go deeper into the subject. Going deeper made the subject matter more understandable” (Roper, 2006). The online course environment provides communication tools, (e.g. threaded discussions, e-mail connectivity, and live chat), that can be used to ask in-depth questions. Students also can spend the time to craft questions that may go beyond what would be asked in an in-person course, probing the subject with greater specificity. Another student explained:

Asking questions helped me to understand the material. I was a student that did not have experience in many classes, but the other students did. Asking questions of some of the other students helped me understand the principles and practices professionals in the field face on a daily basis (Roper, 2006).

“The teacher's role then, changes from being the primary questioner to one of training students in the art of questioning. There is a radical change of perspective here. Instead of concentrating on what is known, members of the class focus on what is not known yet, and ask each other for help in knowing it” (Heckman & Annabi, 2006). From the responses to this survey, successful online students spent time researching and crafting questions, making them clear and understandable. This was a valuable resource in support of their online learning experience.

5. Keeping yourself motivated

Without the direct physical contact and interaction with other learners or an instructor, an online student can lose their interest or motivation mid-way through their course or program. The graduates who participated in this study were asked what motivation techniques were most helpful in preventing burn out or loss of interest when studying

online. As one student put it, “keeping your eye on the prize” (Roper, 2006) is always helpful. Another student commented, “[t]he main motivator was envisioning myself in cap and gown, walking up and receiving my degree, and having all my dear family and friends in attendance” (Roper, 2006). Students also mentioned they find motivation in the achievement of a good grade, and setting personal goals is a good strategy when direct personal contact with classmates is lacking. One student stated, “I always want to get an “A” in every course I take. It doesn’t matter as much in graduate school as it did as an undergraduate, but it still motivates me” (Roper, 2006). There are opportunities to work with other online students and to use that connection to stay motivated. One student explained, “I had a friend (in my online courses) that I teamed up with, and we tried hard to make sure we not only finished our assignments, but that we turned in only the highest quality work possible” (Roper, 2006).

Developing a way to stay motivated is helpful in being a successful online student. Each individual may find something that works for them, and there are many possibilities for each student to develop a motivation plan. One student stated that he promised to buy himself a new truck if he completed the degree. With a greater amount of work being done independently in online courses, a new online student would be well advised to consider developing personal techniques for staying engaged, and creating a self-motivation plan.

6. Successful instruction techniques

Instructors in online courses employ a variety of techniques aimed at engaging the learner. Some of the techniques that were most successful were discussed by the participants in this study. One student commented, “I liked instructors who logged in often and asked a lot of questions. Not only did this help to increase understanding of the subject, but it gave people the opportunity for class participation” (Roper, 2006). Another student added, “[o]ne teacher went farther than I would expect, but I found his technique wonderful. He posted the initial question for discussion, and then asked us individual questions based on our answers” (Roper, 2006). This technique worked well with a variety of learners and levels of understanding of course materials. The instructor was able to craft questions that matched the students’ level of understanding of the material.

For every course there is a variety of techniques that can be used to incorporate the development of effective e-learning study skills. By adding these to the design of our online courses, we can often improve both the retention and performance of our e-learners. As an alternative to more formal and independent study skills courses or tutorials, this is one option we have for improving the capacity of learners to successfully make the transition from the traditional to the online classroom. (Watkins, 2004)

7. Making a connection with your fellow students

The participants in this study were given the opportunity to identify successful techniques and practices that helped them in the development of their online student skills through some open-ended questions. One student mentioned that making a friend, (that they connected with online) helped. Being part of a community of learners is helpful in courses that are taught in-person, and the same holds true for online classes. One student explained that “it made a huge difference when you had good students in the class”

(Roper, 2006). Another student commented, “[t]he experience was enriched greatly by the relationships and interaction with my fellow students. It amazes me how well we got to know each other even though we were often thousands of miles apart and were only virtual classmates.” The student continued, “I learned as much from other students and their experiences as I did from the instructors. I never expected that type of rewarding learning experience in a traditional classroom” (Roper, 2006). By using online threaded discussions in their course management system, the students are able to extend traditional classroom discussions beyond the traditional boundaries of physical class time. Students in the online class may get to know one another more from recognizing the writing style and expression of thoughts and ideas, rather than by their physical attributes. Many students develop meaningful connections with their online classmates that can translate into career networking opportunities late on.

Summary

From the responses of these successful online students, there are several techniques that a student can use to develop online learning skills that will promote a rewarding learning experience. Developing a time management strategy is one of the most important techniques for managing the course requirements as an independent learner. Students who participated in this study agree that the online discussions with fellow students and the instructor are central to the learning experience. Developing techniques to make the most of online discussions will add to a student’s learning experience and promote success in the online course. The ability to apply concepts from the online course, or as one student described it “use it or lose it,” (Roper, 2006) will add to the ability to retain and synthesize course objectives.

The successful online students who participated in this study agree on the importance of developing and asking questions, and using this technique to engage both fellow students and the instructor. As one student explained, this is a way to “go deeper into the subject,” and that “going deeper makes the subject matter more understandable” (Roper, 2006). Robert Heckman, and Hala Annabi (2006) explain, “the role of the teacher in an online case study discussion changes in the following 5 ways:

- * From choreographer of an implicit Socratic dialogue to designer of explicit new structures.
- * From questioner of students to trainer of student questioners.
- * From provider of feedback to teacher of student responders.
- * From provider of information to teacher of student information providers.
- * From analyst (with a focus on rational deduction) to editor (with a focus on story values.)

Staying motivated in the class is a challenge for students studying independently, and who may never actually see their instructor or classmates face to face. Developing a personal motivation strategy can be a great asset to the online learning experience, and can keep students from losing interest or burning out. Another technique that the successful online students in this study agree on is the importance of making a connection with fellow students. Having a meaningful connection with another student can provide support and promote a sense of being a learner among other learners.

There's no magical formula guaranteeing success in online learning. One important step for students considering an online course or program is to recognize that a different set of student skills may be useful in achieving good grades, and in getting the most out of an online course. The techniques discussed by these successful online students will promote a rich learning experience and provide a foundation for developing these skills.

References:

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Roper, A., (2006), Online Student Skills Survey, [unpublished anonymous responses to survey delivered online to selected research participants].

Russell, T. L., (1999). The "no significant difference phenomenon." Raleigh: North Carolina State University. Retrieved September 30, 2004, from: http://nt.media.hku.hk/no_sig_diff/phenoml.html.

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Appendix A: Sample Survey Instrument

Population:

Golden Gate University graduates with a 3.5 GPA or better and at least 80% of their program taken online (59 participants responded)

Scope:

Identification of successful student skills or behaviors of online students who have completed their program.

Introductory message:

Dear Graduate,

We are conducting a survey to identify successful student skills and techniques used by our recent graduates. You have been selected to participate in this survey based upon your successful participation in a significant number of online courses and your impressive cumulative grade point average. We'd like to ask you to take a few minutes to complete this survey, and to be as specific and detailed in your answers as possible. Your responses will be completely anonymous, and will assist future online students in learning skills and techniques that will contribute to their success.

Thank you,

Open Ended Survey Questions:

1. What time management strategies were most helpful to you?
2. How did you avoid procrastinating or falling behind in your online course(s)?
3. How did you make the most of your interaction with other students?
4. What techniques did you use to help you retain what you read in your online course(s)?
5. Were you comfortable asking questions of your instructor and classmates?
6. Did you use techniques to motivate yourself to do well in your online course(s)?
If so, what were they?
7. What were effective ways to deal with or prevent distractions that came up while participating in your online course(s)?
8. What instruction techniques or methods did you find most helpful in your online course(s)?
9. Other than what's listed above, what helped you become a successful online student?

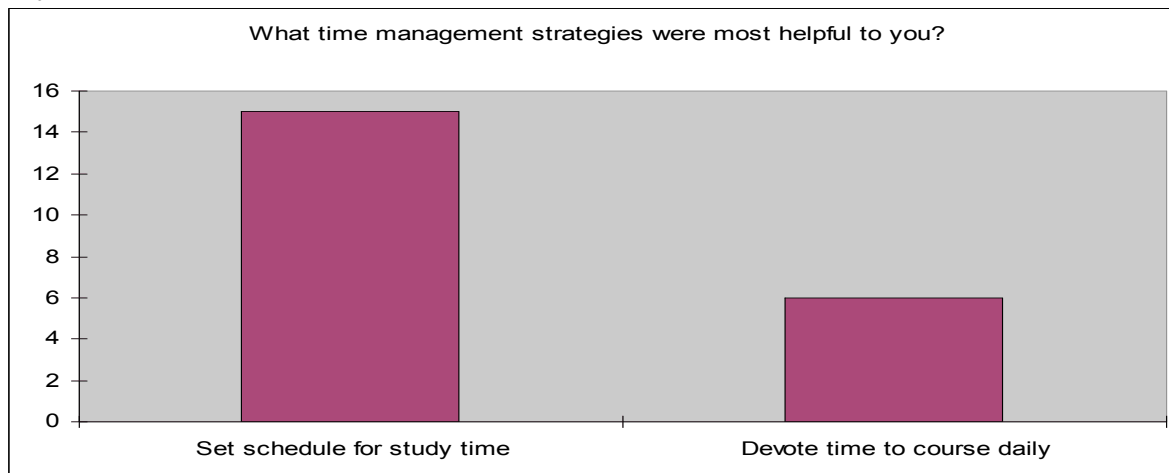
Appendix B : Response categories and graphs

Question 1

Set schedule for study
timeDevote time to
course dailyWhat time management
strategies were most helpful to
you?

78.94%

31.57%



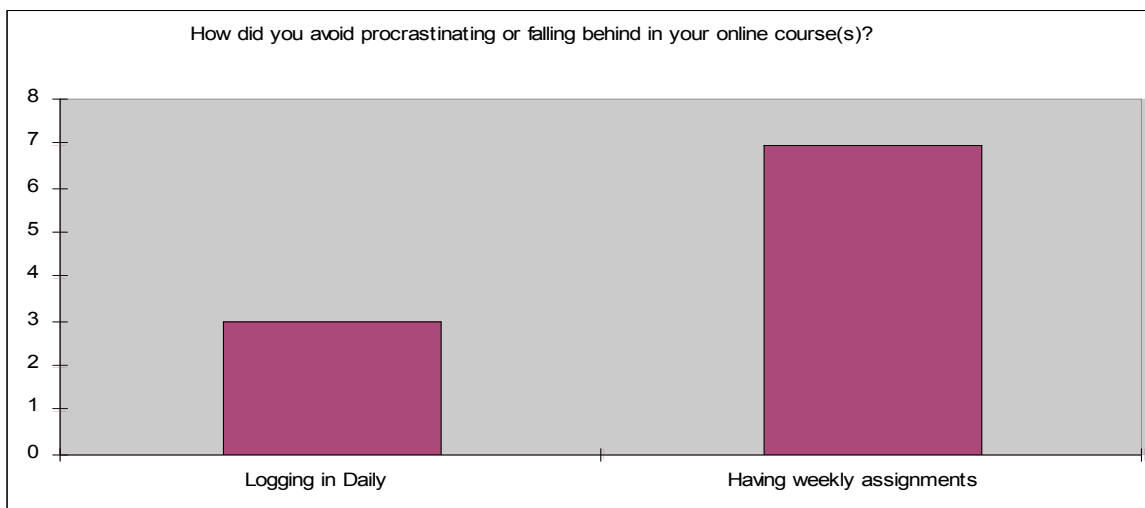
Question 2

Logging in Daily

Having weekly
assignmentsHow did you avoid
procrastinating or falling behind
in your online course(s)?

15.78%

36.84%



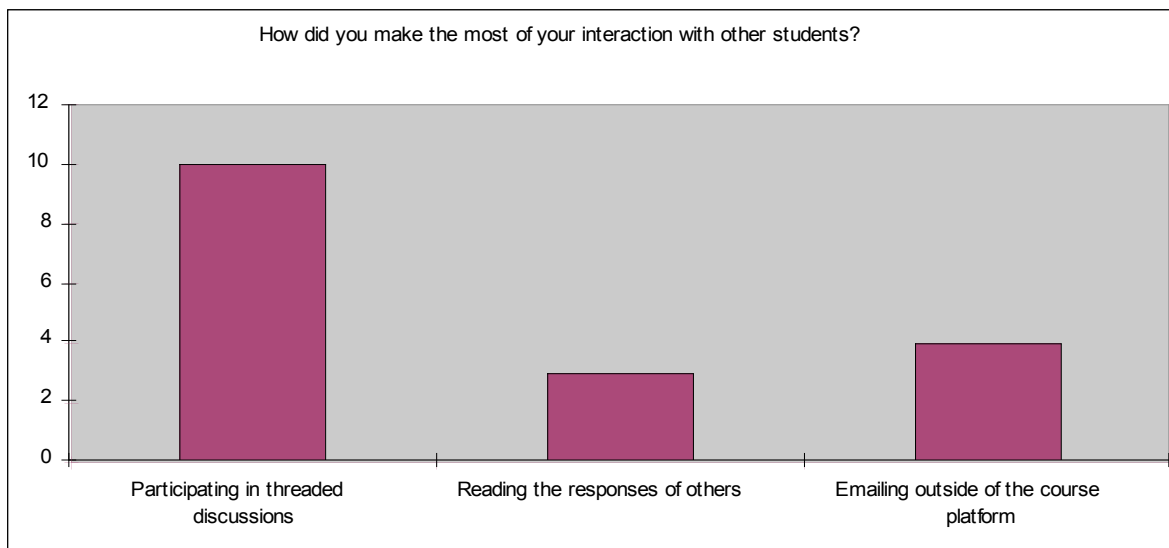
Question 3	Participating in threaded discussions	Reading the responses of others	Emailing outside of the course platform
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How did you make the most of your interaction with other students?

52.63%

15.78%

21.05%

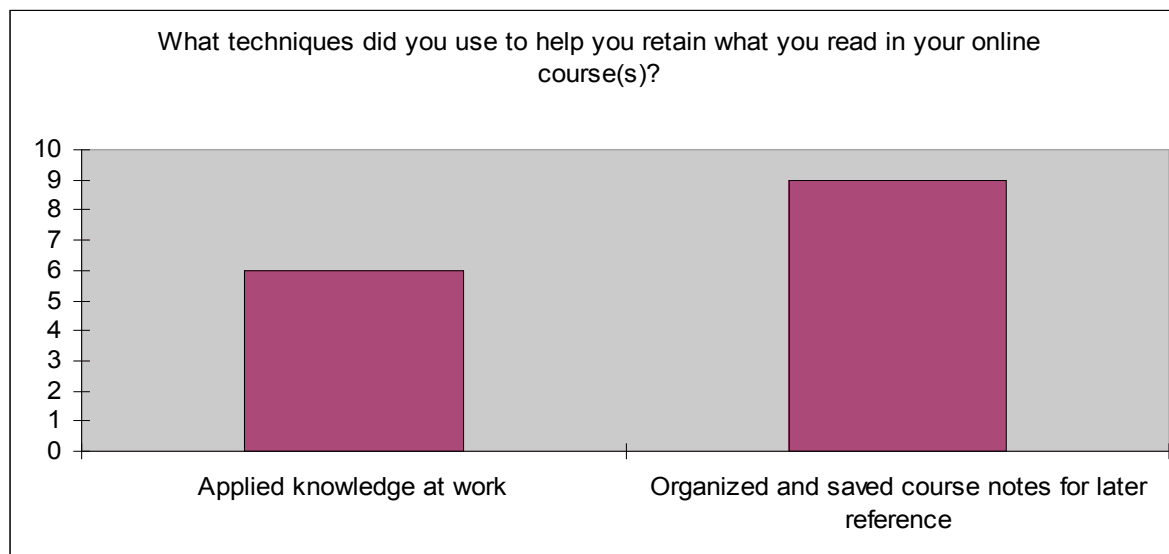


Question 4	Applied knowledge at work	Organized and saved course notes for later reference
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What techniques did you use to help you retain what you read in your online course(s)?

31.57%

47.36%



Question 5	Researching questions before asking (using citations)	Reading other students' real life experiences	Creating clear understandable questions	Just ask
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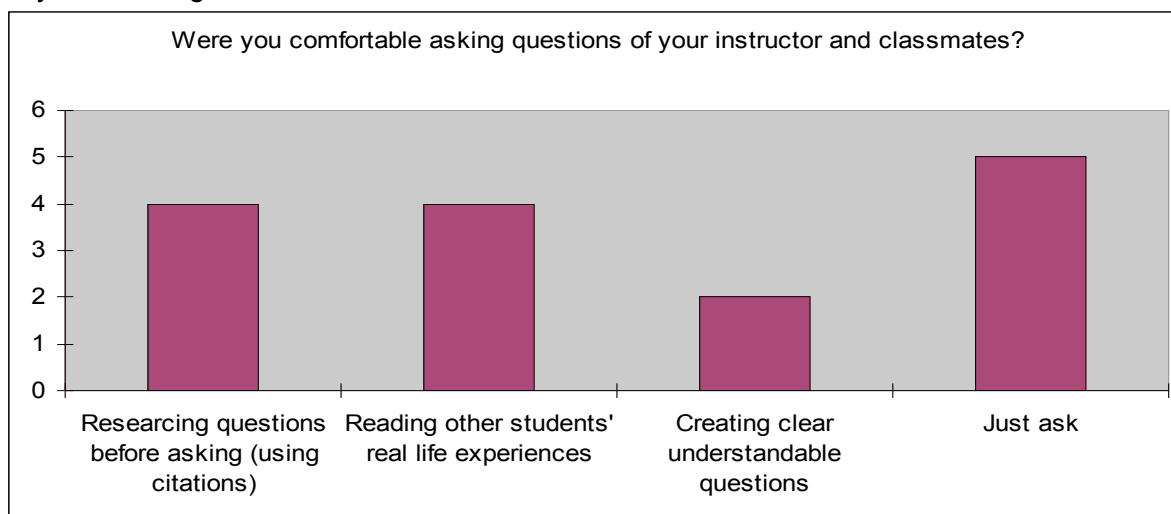
How did you make asking questions to your instructor and classmates useful to your learning?

21.05%

21.05%

10.50%

26.31%



Question 6

Grade awareness

Setting personal goals

Self-encouragement

Other students' encouragement and feedback

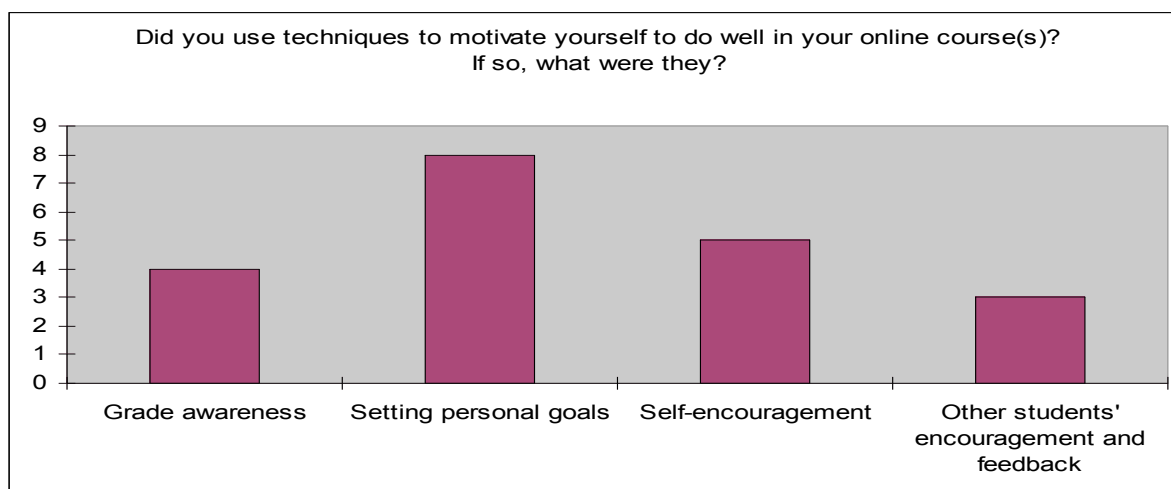
Did you use techniques to motivate yourself to do well in your online course(s)? If so, what were they?

21.05%

42.10%

26.31%

15.78%



Question 7

Finding a quiet place to work (home or office)

Setting a time that is free of distraction

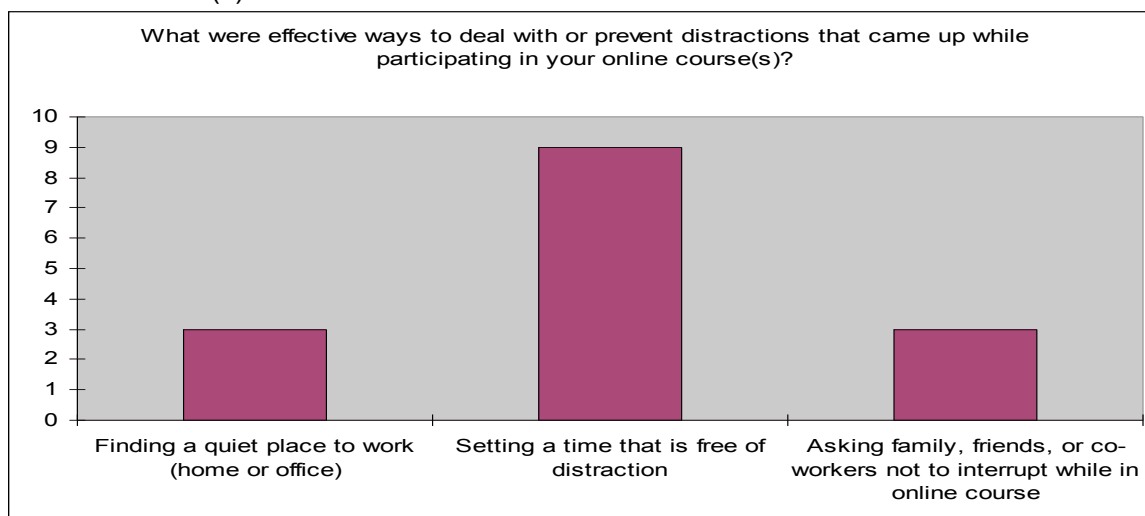
Asking family, friends, or co-workers not to interrupt while in online course

What were effective ways to deal with or prevent distractions that came up while participating in your online course(s)?

15.70%

47.36%

15.70%



Question 8

Being given assignments weeks in advance

Instructor providing online resources

Active involvement by the instructor

Instructor encouraging interaction between students

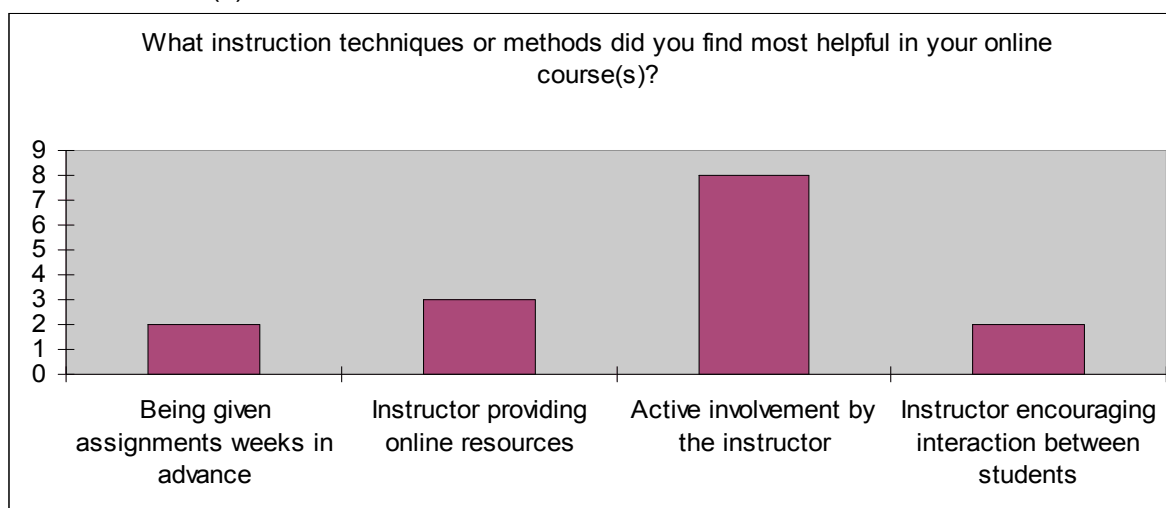
What instruction techniques or methods did you find most helpful in your online course(s)?

10.50%

15.70%

42%

10.50%



Question 9

Finding personal motivation

Help from other students

Staying focused

Support of work supervisor/spouse/friends

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Other than
what's listed
above, what
helped you
become a
successful
Cyber student?

21.05%

15.78%

15.78%

10.50%

